



Taking the call: Ravalli County officials, community honor 911 dispatchers

Perry Backus - Ravalli Republic
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Ravalli County 911 communication's specialist, Michael Thomas, takes a moment away from his console to talk about his job. "It's nice to know that at the end of the day, you've helped people," he said.

When the lights flash and sirens scream as emergency workers hurry to help frantic callers, they are the calm voices on the other end of telephone.

Downstairs in the county courthouse, surrounded by concrete, Ravalli County's cadre of 911 dispatchers calmly stare at the four computer monitors filled with information they need to direct sheriff's deputies, firemen or EMTs to the unfolding emergency.

They are the unsung heroes who no one ever really gets to know, said Ravalli County sheriff's Lt. Zae Hudson.

"People see the deputies. They see the firefighters. They see the people inside the ambulance who have come to help," Hudson said. "They don't see the people who direct all that traffic. They don't remember that aspect of their emergency."

Hudson, the director of Ravalli County's 911 Center, would like to change that.

This past week, Hudson and others honored the 13 communication specialists who staff the center 24/7.

"When seconds can make a difference between life and death, these are the people sitting right in the wheelhouse, making the decisions that can truly make a difference," Hudson said. "It's such an honorable profession. We're so fortunate to have these dedicated professionals who choose to serve our community."

Pam Russell has worked as a dispatcher for a little over 18 years.

"I like helping people," she said, in between calls last week. "You always feel good when there is a positive outcome and you know that you've made a difference in someone's life."

At the dispatch station right next to hers, Michael Thomas said he enjoys that aspect of the job as well. He's been a dispatcher for more than six years.

Sometimes it's stressful.

"When you get a high wind or microburst that knocks trees down everywhere, your adrenaline can jump way up," Thomas said. "It happens so fast and your training just takes over. There's down time here too, when you have a chance to laugh.

"It's nice to know that at the end of the day, you've helped people," Thomas said.

The number of calls handled by Ravalli County's dispatch crew is staggering.

In 2012, there were 97,615 calls in and out of the center.

Hudson said there are times when all three dispatchers on duty are handling a different emergency.

"That happens almost on a daily basis," he said. "When they finish up the emergency they are working on, they'll often help each other out. It's a lot of responsibility to juggle."

To make addressing those emergency calls even more challenging, the dispatchers also take calls from anyone wanting to burn something on their property. In 2012, they dealt with almost 13,000 of those calls in between everything else.

"Those calls often come in right in the middle of when they are dealing with an emergency," Hudson said. "They might be trying to save someone's life. We hope people realize that when they might have to wait a few minutes to make their report."

"We think that's an important service," he said. "It helps us ensure that we're not calling volunteer firefighters off their regular jobs to go out to a controlled burn."

The Ravalli County 911 Center dispatches for 12 fire departments, five local law enforcement agencies, five ambulances and a host of state and federal agencies.

Hudson said it's vital that people use the 911 service for only emergency calls.

When they do call, people should be prepared to:

- Provide their name, telephone number, address or location and a detailed description of the incident being reported.
- Listen to the dispatcher and let them guide the conversation.
- Be prepared to offer a physical description if the emergency involves a criminal suspect.
- Use a landline when possible. Wireless phones may not tell the dispatcher where you are located.

Hudson said it's also important that people post their address where it can be seen clearly from the roadway.

"If those first responders can't find a physical address, seconds can turn into minutes," he said. "And things can start to get dicey."

The Ravalli County Sheriff's Office took over management of the 911 Center about six months ago.

"I think it's been very, very positive," Hudson said. "We had a bit of a toxic environment when we first came in here, but that's changed drastically in the last six months. We still have some work to do, but we're making great progress."

A number of local businesses and churches helped the county honor the dispatch team, including Fiesta En Jalisco Mexican Restaurant, Bath & Body Works, Dollar Tree, Murdoch's Supply, Hamilton's Marketplace and the Solid Rock Baptist, Canyon View, Calvary Chapel, and Cornerstone churches.

"We appreciate the help they offered us in honoring these folks," Hudson said. "It's been a blessing. This job can be thankless and I know they appreciate knowing that people appreciate them."